

# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

Issues involving child labor are important throughout the world. Laws and regulations limiting the extent and type of work that children can perform have been in place in the United States for many years. These regulations reflect society's concern about preserving children's safety and well-being and ensuring that children have sufficient time available for their schooling. Within the constraints of these regulations, youths engage in a significant amount of work activity, both in informal jobs, such as mowing lawns and babysitting, and in regular "employee" jobs.

A brief summary of key aspects of the U.S. laws and regulations governing child labor is presented in exhibit 1. Given these regulations, child labor in the United States generally means labor by teenagers. Regulations differ by age of the youth, with tighter restrictions for those aged 14 to 15 than for those aged 16 to 17. Rules also differ between the agricultural and nonagricultural sectors of the economy.

This report has three main purposes. First, it explains the current U.S. regulations governing child labor. Second, it provides a detailed look at youth labor in this country, including how it differs among major demographic groups, between the agricultural and nonagricultural sectors, and over time. Third, it describes the outcomes of young people's work activities, including occupational injuries and fatalities and other, longer term consequences. Much government in-

formation is published regularly for the standard classification of 16- to 19-year-olds. This report contributes to knowledge by presenting information not normally provided for youths under 18 years of age. Exhibit 2 shows the datasets that form the basis for the analysis presented in later chapters. Although data availability places some constraints on the information that can be provided for youths of different ages, these sources permit us to present a rich picture of youth labor in the United States.

How did regulations on child labor evolve in this country, and what is their current status? Chapter 2 of this report addresses these questions, looking at both Federal and State laws and regulations and current policy approaches.

What is the current situation regarding the employment of youths? Chapters 3 and 4 present detailed information on this topic. The vast majority of American youths engage in some labor market activities while enrolled in school. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), the authors of chapter 3 demonstrate that work activity is substantial even among 14- and 15-year-olds. Chapter 4 presents data on employment and unemployment of 15- to 17-year-olds from the Current Population Survey (CPS). It shows that, while it is not commonly recognized, the percentage of teens aged 15 to 17 who are employed actually has fallen somewhat over the past 20 years. (NOTE: In these chapters, we also will discuss what has happened to the actual levels of teen employment.) Al-

though both chapters 3 and 4 discuss employment of youths in all industries, we break out agriculture for separate attention in chapter 5 because it has special characteristics, and is subject to different regulations regarding child labor than are nonagricultural industries. In all three of these chapters on youth employment, we detail substantial differences among demographic groups in the probability that a youth works and in the amount and types of work performed.

Youths benefit from pay received for this work, but do these work experiences provide other benefits or costs? To address this question, chapter 6 examines youth safety in the workplace. Job-related youth fatalities, which varied between 62 and 70 per year over the period 1992–97, disproportionately occurred in family businesses and in agriculture. The incidence of lost worktime injuries among youths fell over this same period. Youth employment may have long-term consequences, including effects on educational attainment and future employment and wage growth. Chapter 7 presents information from NLSY79 on college attendance and labor market experience of persons while they were aged 18 to 30, examined separately for individuals categorized by work activity while aged 16 to 17. The generally positive relationship shown does not necessarily imply cause and effect. Chapter 7 also briefly discusses the considerable literature that has emerged from attempts to identify the educational and labor market outcomes of early work experience.

---

This chapter was contributed by Marilyn Manser, an associate commissioner with the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

**Exhibit 1–1. Federal limits on the hours that youth may work and the types of work that they may perform in nonagricultural industries<sup>1</sup>**

Age of youth	Limits on the type of work	Limits on number of hours and time of the day
16- to 17-year-olds	Banned from performing those occupations that the Secretary of Labor determines to be particularly hazardous for this age group.	No limits.
14- to 15-year-olds	Banned from work in most industries and from various occupations. May be employed in retail, food service, and gasoline service establishments.	There are limits on the total number of hours per day and per week, as well as on the time of day, that work may be performed.
Under 14 years of age	Banned from most work. May perform tasks for which no covered employment relationship arises, such as babysitting on a part-time, irregular basis.	

<sup>1</sup> For the nonagricultural sector, there are exceptions to these rules. Rules differ for agricultural work. See ch. 2 for details.

**Exhibit 1–2. Datasets used in this report**

Dataset	Coverage	Periodicity	Type of information	Other
National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1979 (NLSY79)	Cohort of individuals aged 14 to 22 in 1979	Annual through 1994; biennial 1996-present	Longitudinal survey. Extensive information on work experience, education, and a variety of social and demographic factors.	Interviews with youth respondents
National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 (NLSY97)	Cohort of individuals aged 12 to 17 in 1997	Annual	Longitudinal survey. Round 1, collected in 1997, contains extensive information on youth work experience, education, family background, and a variety of other social and demographic factors.	Interviews with youth respondents
Current Population Survey (CPS)	Individuals aged 15 and older in households	Monthly	Primarily cross-sectional. (Also provides short-term longitudinal information on individuals, who are interviewed 8 times in 16 months.) Focus on current labor force behavior. Contains demographic information.	Accepts proxy respondents
National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS)	Farmworkers performing crop agriculture	Annual	Cross-sectional survey. Information on demographics, migration, well-being.	Interviews with respondents aged 14 and older. Also obtains information on children of farmworkers.
Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI)	All industries	Annual	Census. Information on type of injury, worker demographics.	Information obtained from multiple sources
Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses (SOII)	Establishments in private industry (except private households and employers with 10 or fewer employees in agriculture)	Annual	Information on types of cases and basic worker demographics.	